

Palestinian PM warns EU against boosting ties with Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad has urged the European Union not to upgrade relations with Israel, citing lack of progress in the Middle East peace talks, diplomatic sources said yesterday.

At a meeting with European diplomats on Monday, Fayyad said there had been no improvement of the situation in the Palestinian territories since the European Union started discussing upgrading ties with Israel on June 16.

Fayyad spoke to the officials ahead of the December 8 European Council meeting and the plenary session of the European Parliament on Wednesday at which the EU is expected to decide whether to boost ties with Israel.

Fayyad, cited by diplomatic sources, said that

in the week the upgrade is being discussed, "the misery index in Gaza has never been higher" due largely to Israel's near-complete closure of the Palestinian territory over the past three weeks.

The prime minister also pointed out Jewish settlement construction in the occupied West Bank has increased since the Annapolis, Maryland conference that relaunched the peace process in November last year and at which Israel reiterated its commitment to freeze all settlement activity.

Checkpoints, home demolitions and evictions in the Palestinian territories have also increased, Fayyad said.

"All of these facts on the ground have jeopardized the possibility of the two-state solution and the credibility of the negotiations process begun at Annapolis," diplomats quoted him as saying.

Iraq's 'Chemical Ali' condemned to death again

AFP, Baghdad

An Iraqi court yesterday condemned Iraq's notorious "Chemical Ali" Hassan al-Majid to death over his role in Saddam Hussein's brutal crushing of a 1991 Shia uprising, according to an AFP correspondent at the trial, his second death sentence.

The court also imposed the death penalty on Abdulghani Abdul Ghafour, the head of Saddam's Baath party in southern Iraq at the time, and handed life sentences to four other officials.

Another nine former senior officials were to be sentenced by the court for their role in the killing of tens of thousands of people killed during the uprising that followed Saddam's defeat by US forces in the 1991 Gulf War.



Anti-government protesters celebrate a court decision against the ruling party during a demonstration at the besieged Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Bangkok yesterday. A Thai court dissolved the ruling party and banned the premier from politics, plunging the Kingdom into further uncertainty as an occupation of Bangkok's airports turned increasingly bloody.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) talks with US Senator and defeated Republican presidential candidate John McCain during a meeting at Singh's residence in New Delhi yesterday. McCain is in India for a two-day visit.

Iran speaker mulls talks with US Congress

AFP, Tehran

Iranian parliament speaker Ali Larijani said he is considering talks with members of the US Congress amid hopes for improved ties with the next administration in Washington, the local press reported on Tuesday.

"Several letters were received from members of Congress and Senators. We feel that it is time to hold bilateral negotiations," the conservative Larijani was quoted as saying by the

Kargozaran newspaper.

"We have not given a negative response to this issue. It is under examination," he added, without specifying the dates of the letters or who had sent them.

Since Barack Obama's US presidential election win, Iranian politicians have voiced hope for a shift in US policy towards Tehran and in an unprecedented move, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was quick to congratulate Obama.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Thai PM's ouster won't solve crisis

AFP, Bangkok

The court ruling forcing Thailand's premier from office has met a key demand of protesters, but analysts say it will not solve the kingdom's long-running political turmoil.

The Constitutional Court disbanded premier Somchai Wongsawat's majority People Power Party and two of its coalition partners on Tuesday, a week after anti-government demonstrators shut down Thailand's main airport.

Protesters say they will now allow flights to leave the besieged Suvarnabhumi international airport, but have given no indication on

whether they will vacate the smaller Don Mueang domestic hub or give up their campaign.

"The wider impact (of the ruling) will be substantial, critical, possibly cataclysmic," Thitinan Pongsudhirak, a political analyst at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University, told AFP.

He said the court decision had effectively "eliminated now almost a generation of Thai politicians."

The three parties were banned after party executives were stripped of parliamentary seats for vote fraud during elections in December 2007 -- the first polls since premier Thaksin Shinawatra was ousted in a 2006 coup.

Thaksin's enemies in the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) have been battling the government since May, accusing it of being his puppet and taking the protests to new heights with the airport blockade.

Rival pro-government protesters have taken to the streets in recent days, and grenade attacks on PAD protest sites by unidentified groups have so far claimed three lives.

The court verdict marks the political demise for Thaksin's brother-in-law Somchai, who quickly said he accepted the ruling, but it will not necessarily bring down the government.

US panel warns biological attack likely by 2013

AP, Washington

The United States can expect a terrorist attack using nuclear or more likely biological weapons before 2013, reports a bipartisan commission in a study being briefed Tuesday to Vice President-elect Joe Biden. It suggests the Obama administration bolster efforts to counter and prepare for germ warfare by terrorists.

"Our margin of safety is shrinking, not growing," states the report, obtained by The Associated Press. It is sched-

uled to be publicly released Wednesday.

The commission is also encouraging the new White House to appoint one official on the National Security Council to exclusively coordinate US intelligence and foreign policy on combating the spread of nuclear and biological weapons.

The report of the Commission on the Prevention of WMD Proliferation and Terrorism, led by former Sens. Bob Graham of Florida and Jim Talent of Missouri,

acknowledges that terrorist groups still lack the needed scientific and technical ability to make weapons out of pathogens or nuclear bombs. But it warns that gap can be easily overcome, if terrorists find scientists willing to share or sell their know-how.

"The United States should be less concerned that terrorists will become biologists and far more concerned that biologists will become terrorists," the report states.

Somali pirates fail to hijack US cruise liner

AP, Nairobi

Pirates near Somalia chased and shot at a US cruise liner with more than 1,000 people on board but failed to hijack the vessel, a maritime official said Tuesday.

The liner, carrying 656 international passengers and 399 crew members, was sailing in the Gulf of Aden on Sunday when it encountered six pirates in two speedboats, said Noel Choong who heads the International Maritime Bureau's piracy reporting centre in Malaysia.

Obama still looks for Iraq pullout in 16 months

AP, Chicago

Barack Obama says the US-Iraq security agreement approved by Iraq's parliament puts the US on a "glide path" toward reducing forces there.

As he named Robert Gates to continue on as defence chief, with a new mission to reduce US involvement in Iraq, the president-elect said he'll listen to Gates, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the com-

manders on the ground in determining how to proceed with a troop withdrawal.

Obama told reporters in Chicago that he still thinks 16 months is the "right time frame" for removing US combat troops from Iraq.

He said the top priority is making sure troops are safe during that transition, and that the Iraqi people are well served as their government takes on more security responsibilities.



Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) speaks after President-elect Barack Obama introduced her as his choice for secretary of state during a press conference at the Hilton Hotel on Monday in Chicago, Illinois.

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